

RISK MANAGEMENT ARTICLE

Evidence-based Dentistry Shields Against Litigation

Evidence-based practice (EBP) has become an important consideration for all healthcare practitioners, including dentists. Understanding EBP, as well as recognized standards of care, and applying them to daily practice is essential for providing not only optimal patient care, but also a shield to be used in the event of litigation. Plaintiff attorneys will be the first to raise the issue of substandard care if a dentist has not made decisions based on careful consideration of the evidence.

By integrating evidence-based dentistry (EBD) into your practice, you can improve patient care and reduce your risk for legal action.

The gold standard

Evidence-based dentistry is a problem-solving, patient-centered approach that encompasses research, clinical expertise, and patient values and circumstances. The American Dental Association (ADA) states that EBD "integrates the dentist's clinical expertise, the patient's needs and preferences, and the most current, clinically relevant evidence." It's important to understand that EBD is a process, not a "cookbook" for practicing dentistry.

Evidence-based dentistry is accepted as the gold standard for practice because it improves patient outcomes. In 2001, the ADA published *Policy Statement on Evidence-Based Dentistry*. In addition to defining EBD, the statement lists the steps of the process (see *Steps of EBD*, below), and notes that the ADA "supports the concept of evidence-based dentistry."

Although most dentists agree that EBD is important, they also agree that challenges can make it difficult to integrate EBD into an already busy practice. Fortunately, you can take steps to overcome these barriers.

Overcoming the time barrier

Many resources are available to break the time barrier, particularly when it comes to collecting and evaluating the evidence. One of the most important is the ADA's Center for Evidence-Based Dentistry (<http://ebd.ada.org>). The center includes ADA clinical practice guidelines, critical summaries, and systematic reviews. For example, you can access clinical practice guidelines ranging from topical fluoride for caries prevention to screening for oral cancer. The site also includes plain language summaries, which can be helpful for communicating scientific information to patients; keep in mind that patient input plays a key role in EBD.

Additional resources include

- Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (www.cochrane.org), which provides analysis of available literature related to a topic (some information available for free) and in particular, the Cochrane Oral Health Group, an international network of healthcare professionals, researchers, and consumers who prepare, maintain, and disseminate systematic reviews of randomized controlled trials in oral health (<http://ohg.cochrane.org>)
- Professional journals such as *Journal of Evidence-Based Dental Practice*, *Evidence-Based Dentistry*, and *Journal of the American Dental Association* (subscription)
- National Guideline Clearinghouse (www.guideline.gov), which provides summaries of clinical practice guidelines and has a tool that allows the user to compare multiple guidelines (free access)

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- PubMed (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed), a database of scientific articles (abstracts available at no charge); to search more efficiently, dentists can use PubMed Clinical Queries, which allows the user to filter the search by categories such as systematic reviews
- U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org), which provides evidencebased recommendations for preventive care (free access)

One of the most time-consuming aspects of EBD is analyzing the evidence. Tools that can help with this process include:

- Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT, www.consort-statement.org), a set of recommendations for reporting clinical trials
- critical appraisal checklists from the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (www.casp-uk.net/#!casp-tools-checklists/c18f8); the free checklists promote more efficient analysis
- information on how to evaluate elements of a study, provided by SUNY Downstate Medical Center (<http://library.downstate.edu/EBM2/analysis.htm>)
- the "How to read a paper" section of the *BMJ website*, which contains articles on how to read and interpret different types of research studies and has two articles related to statistics (www.bmj.com/about-mj/resources-readers/publications/how-read-paper).

Overcoming a lack of knowledge

Many resources exist for dentists who did not receive education related to EBD in their original education program and for dentists who want more information. Several free self-study programs are available online. For example, staff at Duke University Medical Center Library and the Health Sciences Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill developed an "Introduction to Evidence-Based Practice" tutorial (<http://guides.mclibrary.duke.edu/content.php?pid=431451&sid=3529491>). Boston University has a short introduction to EBD available online at <https://medlib.bu.edu/tutorials/ebm/intro/indexd.php>.

Evidence of your education efforts should be retained in your records so it can be easily retrieved in case of a lawsuit to demonstrate knowledge.

Overcoming resistance

In addition to the dentist, dental staff also needs to base their practice on evidence. Unfortunately, you may encounter resistance in this area. To overcome resistance, serve as a role model for others and also support staff in their efforts to update their knowledge by providing, if possible, paid time to attend education programs.

One option is the free online video tutorials available from the ADA that are suitable for dental professionals at all levels. Find them at <http://ebd.ada.org/en/education/tutorials>.

Dental hygienists should be aware that basing decisions on evidence is an integral part of the Standards for Clinical Dental Hygiene Practice from the American Dental Hygienists' Association. In 2014, the *Journal of Dental Hygiene* published "Keeping Current: A Commitment to Patient Care Excellence through Evidence Based Practice," a useful resource for those less familiar with the concepts. Be sure that job descriptions for staff include a statement that practice must be evidence based.

Keeping up

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Staying current on developments in the field helps ensure you are aware of the latest research in dentistry. Technology can make the process easier. For example, services such as Feedly (www.feedly.com) let users customize feeds of news stories related to their interest areas. Users can easily scan the headlines and short descriptions to determine if they want to learn more. Other options:

- Sign up to receive electronic table of contents from relevant journals. You can scan the table of contents to determine what is of interest.
- Subscribe to electronic newsletters such as those provided by Medscape and JournalWatch.
- Listen to podcasts while exercising or commuting to work.
- Download an app such as Mendeley (www.mendeley.com) that lets users capture articles as PDFs and organize them according to keywords and other parameters.
- Follow relevant Twitter accounts such as @cebdentistry from the Centre for Evidence-Based Dentistry.

The five steps of EBD

- 1. Question.** Define a clinical question. Some experts recommend formatting the question according to PICOT (patient population, intervention or issue of interest, comparison intervention or group, outcome, and time frame).
- 2. Find.** Search for and collect the most relevant best evidence that might help answer the question.
- 3. Appraise.** Critically appraise the evidence for its validity, reliability, and applicability. Use a grading system that compares the evidence against predefined criteria.
- 4. Act.** Integrate the best evidence with clinical expertise and patient preferences and values in making a practice decision or change.
- 5. Evaluate.** Evaluate outcomes of the practice decision or change based on evidence.

Sources: American Dental Association. Policy statement on evidence-based dentistry. Trans. 2001:462; Melnyk BM, Fienout-Overholdt E. *Evidence-Based Practice in Nursing & Healthcare: A Guide to Best Practice*, 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins; 2010.

Practicing effectively

Basing practice on evidence benefits patients by ensuring optimal outcomes and benefits dentists by providing support for their decisions should they find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being named in a legal action. As a reminder, you should also carry adequate professional liability insurance to protect yourself.

Resources

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Article reviewed by Dr. Kenneth W.M. Judy, DDS, FACD, FICD, PhD

Article by: Cynthia Saver, MS, RN, President, CLS Development, Columbia, Maryland

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